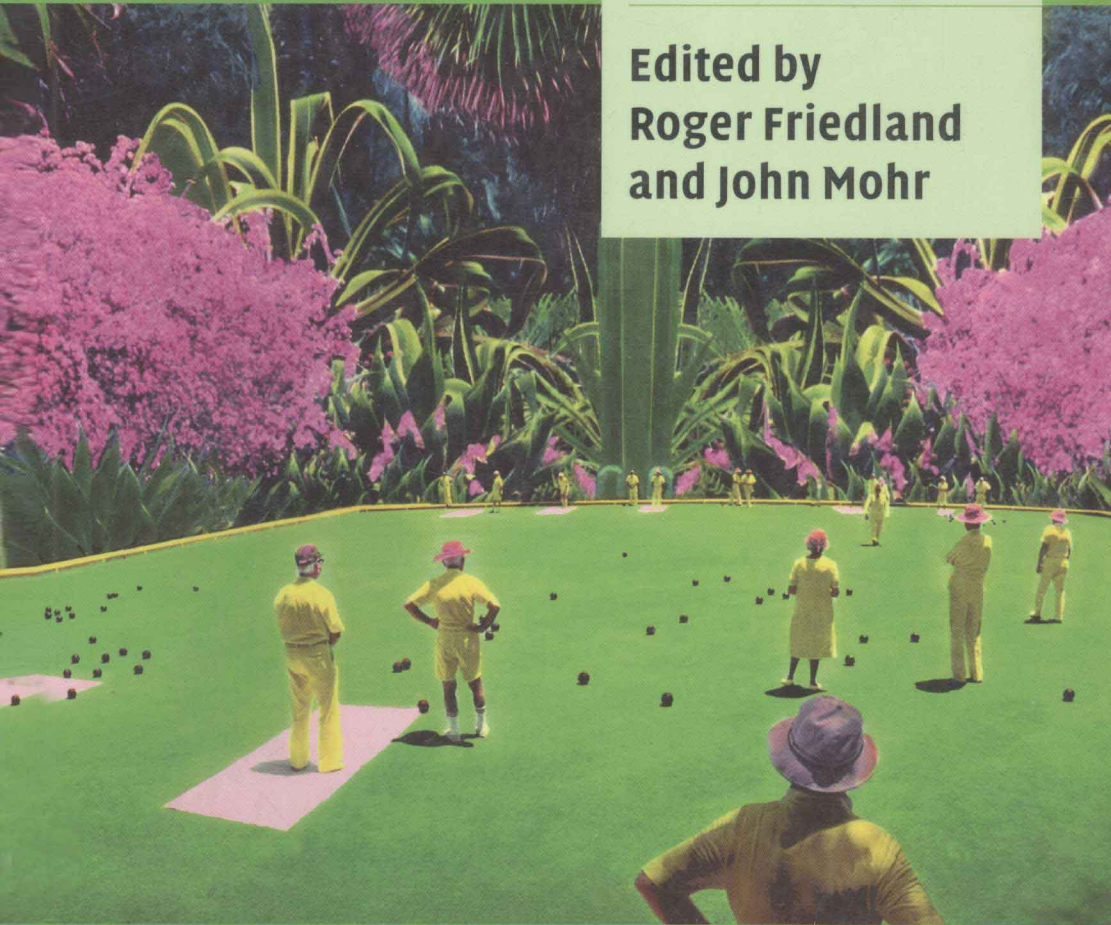


Matters of Culture

Cultural Sociology
in Practice

Edited by
Roger Friedland
and John Mohr



CAMBRIDGE

Matters of Culture: Cultural Sociology in Practice

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Roger Friedland and John Mohr



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2004

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Times (monotype) 10/12.5 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Matters of Culture : Cultural Sociology in Practice / edited by Roger Friedland and John Mohr.
p. cm. – (Cambridge Cultural Social Studies)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 79162 6 (hardback) – ISBN 0 521 79545 1 (paperback)

I. Culture – Study and teaching – United States. 2. Culture. I. Friedland, Roger.

II. Mohr, John. III. Series.

HM623.M38 2004

306'.071 – dc22 2003055748 hardback

ISBN 0 521 79162 6 hardback

ISBN 0 521 79545 1 paperback

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Matters of Culture

American sociology is in the midst of a cultural turn. Where sociologists once spurned culture, today they embrace and explore it, seeking to understand the construction of social forms and the way culture matters. Problems of meaning, discourse, aesthetics, value, textuality, form, and narrativity, topics traditionally within the humanists' purview, have come to the fore as sociologists increasingly emphasize the role of meanings, symbols, cultural frames, and cognitive schema in their theorizations of social process and institution. *Matters of Culture* is an introduction to some of the best theorizing in cultural sociology, focusing in particular on questions of power, the sacred, and cultural production. With a major theoretical introduction that lays out the internal structure of the field and its relation to cultural studies and contributions from leading academics, *Matters of Culture* offers students and professors alike a representative range of the types of cultural sociological analysis available.

ROGER FRIEDLAND is Professor of Religious Studies and Sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara and has published extensively in both disciplines. He is co-founder with John Mohr of the Cultural Turn conferences at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

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The cultural turn in American sociology

Roger Friedland and John Mohr

American sociology is in the midst of a cultural turn. Where sociologists once spurned culture, associated as it was with the normative premises of Parsonian theory or with other kinds of idealisms, today they embrace it. Problems of meaning, discourse, aesthetics, value, textuality, and narrativity, topics traditionally within the humanists' purview, are now coming to the fore as sociologists increasingly emphasize the role of meanings, symbols, cultural frames, and cognitive schema in their theorizations of social process and institution. This is happening across the intellectual landscape.

Political sociologists are analyzing the ritual construction of power (Alexander, 1988, 1993; Berezin, 1997; Falasca Zamponi, 1997; Falasca Zamponi, this volume.) Not only have they shown the cultural contingency of such things as nationalism, they have also turned the supposed objectivities of class and sexual position into cultural accomplishments, for example, insisting on the ways in which historically and societally variable meanings of work shape the nature of working-class demands or the ways in which conceptions of the market influence modalities of state intervention (Biernacki, 1995; Brubaker, 1998; Dobbin, 1994). Social movement theory once centered its attention on power balances and resource opportunities enabling challengers to aggregate, to find voice and reach for power (McCarthy and Zald, 1987; Tilly, 1978). It now increasingly analyzes the ways in which interpretations of grievances, understandings of situations, and repertoires of action shape the emergence, strategies, and course of social movements (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991; Friedland and Hecht, 2000; McAdam, 1982; Melucci, 1996; Snow and Benford, 1992).

Organizational theorists, long comfortable with conceptualizations of structure and strategy that depended on objective notions of resource relations, understood through competition and conflict, differentiation, and symbiosis, have increasingly recognized the conventional, and indeed fictional, quality of many organizational forms and strategies. Institutionalists who once looked to

culture as a rushing in where rationality failed, where means–ends relations were uncertain or technologies untried, now increasingly recognize that culture plays a constitutive role in shaping organizational structures, strategies and technologies (Biggart and Guillen, 1999; DiMaggio, 1991; Dobbin, 1994; Fligstein, 1996, 1990; Friedland and Alford, 1991; Mohr and Guerra-Pearson, forthcoming; Scott, 2001; Scott et al., 2000).

Sociologists are increasingly taking bodies, space, and time – the elemental materials of social life – and analyzing the ways in which they figure in social signification. Feminists, and race and queer theorists are showing not only the ways in which the properties of the body are read, but how those readings are generative of the subjectivities inhabiting them (Seidman, 1991; Twine, 1998). Urbanists and sociologists of the built environment are analyzing the ways in which categories are materialized in physical form (Biernacki, 1995; Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Gottdiener, 1995; Molotch, 1998; Zellman and Friedland, 2001; Zukin, 1995), and time, which has either been a staging ground or a fungible resource, is now increasingly understood as a culturally constructed and consequential foundation of social life, manifest in the social productivity of narrative forms, memorialization, and temporal classification (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994; Olick and Robbins, 1998; Somers, 1994; Zerubavel, 1985).

As sociologists maneuver across this new terrain, they confront the methods, theories, and insights of humanist scholars for whom questions of meaning and interpretation have long been at the core of their intellectual project. As sociologists enter this transdisciplinary zone, they are discovering that scholars in the humanities, particularly those in what is often called cultural studies, began making a sociological turn long ago (Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler, 1992). Moving from canonical high culture to more popular forms, analyzing the ways in which cultural products are part of larger transformations in the ways of knowing in domains far from literature and art such as statecraft, cartography, and accounting, discerning the interests embedded in text, tune, image, and cultural forms of all sorts, the humanities drew heavily on post-structuralism, interpretive anthropology, and practice theory (Birmingham, 1986). Humanists increasingly came to assert that culture was not only a social product, but also integral to the production of the social. Scholars in the humanities moved away from a single-minded rereading of independent texts, increasingly analyzing the ways in which society itself could be read as a text. In making this move, they had at their disposal a wide array of analytical tools that had been developed for understanding and theorizing the production of meaning in texts, theories of genre, strategies of reading, types of rhetorical forms, the narrative process, and the nature of performance and sign systems. Inspired by linguistically grounded theorists who asserted that the subject is a position made speakable by language much more than a unitary consciousness speaking a language, humanists

have pointed to the fictional quality of the social, to the logical and psychic contradictions immanent in the performativity of authority.

Where sociologists often hope to show that culture can be explained, and thus interpreted, through an analysis of its relation to social structure, sociologists have much less frequently addressed the cultural meanings themselves. In contrast, humanists bring an interpretative stance to whatever they encounter. While sociologists tend to socialize the text, analyzing the conditions of its production and reception, as well as the social interests it represents, humanists textualize society, assuming that the social order is an order of representation. Institutions, organizations, practices, and structures are all made into significations, texts to be read, grist for their exegetical mill. While they assume that the social is constituted in and through orders of language, code, symbol, and sign, humanists rarely, if ever, specify the contingent social conditions of its production or social productivity. For humanists, interpretation is explanation, whereas for sociologists it tends to be the reverse, in that sociologists make the assumption that their ability to isolate factors that co-vary with some cultural phenomenon constitutes its most useful interpretation.

The cultural turn in sociology and the sociological turn by humanists necessarily calls into question the division between them. This has provoked the calling of names and boundary defense from both sides of the aisle (Alexander, Smith, and Sherwood, 1993; Schudson, 1997; Bielby and Bielby, this volume; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Schneider, this volume). "Sociology," Schudson writes, "can learn from cultural studies, but cultural studies is more in need of sociology than the other way around" (1997: 381). The territorial heat of partition indicates the existence of another space to be explored. The Cultural Turn conferences that we have organized at the University of California, Santa Barbara, from which this volume is composed, have been working forums where scholars from the social sciences and the humanities can explore together this shared and contested zone (<http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/ct>). It is our conviction that both communities have much to offer and much to learn, and it is this spirit that we seek to promote in this volume.

The place of culture in American sociology

Why the turn to culture in American sociology? Certainly it may reflect a new political-economic order in which image and identity increasingly matter. The collapse of the cold-war system and the steady erosion of the organizing power of left-right partisan politics, the politicization of sex, gender, and race, the return of religious cosmology to the public sphere, and the material productivity of software not only make the materiality of the sign abundantly clear, they point to ontology, to the very nature of the social, as a theoretical problem. They also

point to the importance of identity and value-formation in social organization. Who we are and what we desire have become pressing theoretical and political problems. The theoretical status of the human is once again a question. All of this has brought culture to the fore. By this account it is the world that is becoming more cultural and we who must retool or reconceptualize if we are to stay abreast of the changes in that world.

This explanation is insufficient. If the cultural character of the social world is becoming increasingly apparent, that is not to say that culture was any less important for sociological explanation before these events. One need only rethink the classical theoretical texts. Durkheim's insight that the divine was a representation of the collectivity has been well-trodden sociological ground; its corollary, that the symbol was constitutive of the collectivity, has been relatively unexplored (Friedland, 2002). Weber, of course, pointed to forms of rationality that were structures not simply of organization, but of belief. And Marx's labor theory of value was not simply a materialist way of unlocking the laws of capitalist motion, it was a cultural account of valuation and category formation, values and categories integral to the operation of the economy. The entire project of sociological disenchantment presumed enchantment as the basis of the social order. Fictions have always been integral to the construction of social reality.

The cultural turn is neither an adaptation to changing social conditions nor is it a retreat from the core of social theory, from society as a theoretical object. It is rather a reconstitution of the sociological project, a transformation of its ontology and hence in the kinds of research problems that are likely to be most intellectually exciting and the theoretical specifications able to claim validity. It augurs, in short, a paradigm shift. What we are experiencing in American sociology can be better understood – in Thomas Kuhn's (1970) terms – as a recognition of the empirical, theoretical, methodological, and ontological limits of existing intellectual frameworks.

An increasing number of sociologists declare the inadequacy of their theoretical tools to address the problems confronting them. For example, Harrison White first developed a topological algebra for the study of kinship ties (1963) and then helped pioneer the field of social network analysis. These approaches insisted on the objectivity of the social, seeking to explain both social action and actors' accounts of that action in terms of the structure of social ties and one's position within them. White has rethought the utility of his objectivist approach. He now argues:

My theme proper is that mathematical and interpretative approaches should become indispensable to one another, partly because of this increasing scope and flexibility of mathematics . . . It is equally evident that, in avoiding and sidestepping the

interpretative – and thus any direct access to the construction of social reality – *mathematical models have come to an era of decreasing returns to effort. Another way to say the same thing is that interpretative approaches are central to achieving a next level of adequacy in social data.* (White, 1997: 57–58)

Respecifying one's model is no longer enough. White now seeks to study the co-implication of semantic and social spaces of institutional life, value sets, styles of use of those values, and social topologies. Changes in values, uses, and social networks typically occur together. Without understanding the semantic space and actions within it, one cannot understand the social space and its behaviors, and vice versa (White, 2003).¹

The duality of the social and the cultural

Whatever new paradigm emerges, and it is too early to tell what that paradigm will look like, it will have to rethink the category of culture itself and the ways it is deployed in sociological practice. There is an enduring tendency in American sociology to hibe meaning off, to treat it as something apart, inaccessible, and thus either beyond the sociologist's ken (Wuthnow, 1987), or an autonomous domain with its own symbolic logic or economy. This is evident in a wide range of dualities within the field. Perhaps the most fundamental of these is the split between the social and the cultural. The assumption that there is a gap between the old class-based social movements and the new identity-based movements, for example, is premised on a division between the social as an instrumental distributional system of things and the cultural as an expressive system of signs.

Albert Melucci, the social theorist of the “new” social movements, argues that their form and identity are a response to a new informatic mode of domination, a political economy where the commanding heights controls the production of symbols, not things.

In societies with high information density, production does not involve economic resources alone; it also concerns social relationships, symbols, identities, and individual needs. Control of social production does not coincide with its ownership by a recognizable social group. It instead shifts to the great apparatuses of technical and political decision-making. The development and management of complex systems is not secured by simply controlling the workforce and by transforming natural resources; more than that, it requires increasing intervention in the relational processes and symbolic systems on the social/cultural domain . . . The operation and efficiency of economic mechanisms and technological apparatuses depend on the management and control of relational systems where cultural dimensions predominate over “technical” variables. Nor does the market function simply to circulate material goods; it becomes increasingly a system in which symbols are exchanged. (1996: 199–200)